

Town of Long Branch
New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail
State Route 36, South of Shrewsbury River
Long Branch
Monmouth County
New Jersey

HABS No. NJ-1003

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

TOWN OF LONG BRANCH

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Location: New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail, State Route 36, South of Shrewsbury River, Long Branch, Monmouth County, New Jersey.

Significance: Long Branch was one of the earliest New Jersey shore resorts. Summer visits by several presidents, including Ulysses S. Grant, Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, James Garfield, and Chester A. Arthur contributed to Long Branch's status as the premiere American resort of its time.

History: Long Branch, located on the long branch of the Shrewsbury River, north of Long Beach Island, ranks as one of the earliest Jersey Shore resorts. Before Europeans arrived, Iroquois Indians came from Canada and the Great Lakes to summer here, returning home with a bounty of oysters, clams, and fish dried in the sun.¹ By 1788, an inn was in operation here, frequented by Philadelphians.² The tradition of an inn on the property continued into the next century, when the Bath Hotel replaced the original inn sometime after 1837, followed by the Hotel Scarboro. Before the turn of the century, a house operated by Herbert and Chandler presented competition for the original summer rentals.³ More hotels and boarding houses were gradually built, and a resort economy developed. By 1840 New Yorkers were coming by steamers (through an inlet, now filled in) to a dock on the Shrewsbury River.⁴

The golden age of resorts that followed has been the subject of local histories and nostalgic newspaper stories though only a few architectural remnants remain today. By the mid-nineteenth century, the pace of Long Branch life was quickened by liquor and gambling. After the Civil War, a string of U.S. presidents spent their summers here, making Long Branch nationally famous. Ulysses S. Grant was the first, arriving in 1868, the year he was elected. The presence of a president and Civil War hero inspired thousands of ordinary folk to flock to the shore hoping to get a glimpse of him. So honored was high society that a group of summer residents, including George Pullman (whose firm built Pullman railroad sleeping cars) and New York financier Moses Taylor, gave Grant a seaside house at 991 Ocean Ave. Indeed, the president's reputation for hard drinking and gambling at the nearby Monmouth Park race track (which opened three miles from Long Branch in 1870, on grounds now part of Fort Monmouth) was in keeping with the flamboyant style of the place, a "showy effort in the direction of Newport that never quite managed to lose sight of Coney

¹ New Jersey Writer's Project, Entertaining a Nation: The Career of Long Branch (City of Long Branch, NY, 1940), 2.

² Central Railroad of New Jersey, Travellers' and Tourists' Guide to the Seashore, Lakes, and Mountains (New York: Republic Press, ca. 1898), 123.

³ Gustav Kobbe, The New Jersey Coast and Pines (Short Hills: By the author, 1889; reprint, Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1977), 33-4.

⁴ Kobbe, 34.

Island."⁵

Summer visits by subsequent presidents Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, James Garfield (who died at his cottage in Elberon after being shot in Washington, D.C. in 1881), and Chester A. Arthur contributed to Long Branch's status as the premiere American resort of its time. With completion of the New York and Long Branch Railroad in 1875, trains brought loads of urban rich and middle-class to the seashore. They stayed in one of many elaborate Victorian hotels and boarding houses.

The hotels were titanic masses of wood and fancy ornamentation...two or three stories in height and usually a block long. Their porches were furnished with wicker rockers and chairs, shaded from the sun by huge striped awnings in bright colors.⁶

Hardly a stick of wood remains from hotels such as the West End, which had a wood footbridge across Ocean Avenue to a two-story beach pavilion.

Some people came with money to invest, lured by what was later described as "brave, expensive and perilous" advertising, sold with "elaborate pressure methods."⁷ These investors have left more tangible evidence of their times. Promoter Lewis B. Brown made huge profits subdividing oceanfront plots in Elberon, a seaside neighborhood in Long Branch's south end.⁸ Actor Oliver Byron built fourteen cottages at Long Branch, and financier Jay Gould built four. Elberon's streets were lined with shingled, turreted Queen Anne mansions. Old postcards show street profiles of Ocean Avenue porches, gables, towers and awnings facing the sea. The house Solomon R. Guggenheim bought in 1899 on Ocean Avenue was "festooned with fretwork from porch steps to gable peaks."⁹ Though Guggenheim's house was torn down in the 1940s, examples of cottages by Charles McKim of McKim, Mead and White remained through the 1980s, such as the Charles Taylor House, demolished in 1982. Also active here were New York architects Peabody and Stearns, who designed the now-demolished Casino. Meanwhile, artist Winslow Homer came to Long Branch in the late 1800s, drawing for Harpers magazine and painting such scenes as "Long Branch, New Jersey," of women with their parasols peeking over the bluff at the Atlantic.

Other evidence of Long Branch at its height can be found inland, mixed in with the

⁵ New Jersey Writers' Project, 45.

⁶ New Jersey Writers' Project, 44.

⁷ New Jersey Writers' Project, 44-45.

⁸ New Jersey Writers' Project, 44.

⁹ Robert Van Benthuyssen and Audrey Wilson, Monmouth County: A Pictorial History (Norfolk, VA: Donning Co., 1983), 88.

suburbs and shopping centers that have surrounded the old business district. In 1905 Murry Guggenheim, son of mining magnate Meyer Guggenheim, hired architects Carrere and Hastings, architects of the New York Public Library, to design a palatial residence. The Beaux Arts mansion, set amid landscaped grounds at Norwood and Cedar avenues, more resembled a pavilion from the 1893 Chicago World's Fair than a residence. Its design won the architects a gold medal from the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.¹⁰ In 1960 the Guggenheim Foundation of New York donated the house and grounds to Monmouth College, for which it serves as a library. Also part of Monmouth College is Woodrow Wilson Hall, once known as Shadow Lawn, and used as the set in the movie "Annie." The mansion was built for Hubert Parson, president of Woolworth's, the five-and-dime store chain, and was later used by Woodrow Wilson as a summer residence.

Modest homes and cottages off Broadway, the main street, testify to the former presence of gardeners, chauffeurs and servants. Farther east, toward Eatontown, Tinton Falls, Scobeyville and Holmdel, are now thriving stud farms, supplying stables and horses to a Monmouth Park race track that was resurrected after World War II, by which time the site of the old track was part of newer Fort Monmouth.

Long Branch's slow decline as a resort can be traced to 1893, when the New Jersey Legislature shut down horse racing, one of Long Branch's chief draws. Among the state senators who supported the bill was James A. Bradley, founder of Asbury Park, an advocate of temperance, clean living, and obviously Asbury Park, too, which coincidentally "succeeded in drawing away a substantial portion of the wealthiest visitors to Long Branch."¹¹

The "cottagers" hung around longer; more presidents, William McKinley and Woodrow Wilson were yet to come; and more Guggenheims would build mansions. At the dawn of the automobile age, car racing became an attraction for a time and there were horse shows untainted by the vice of betting.¹² The loss of gambling was a blow to an economy based nearly exclusively on resort trade where, in the nineteenth century, local businesses such as shirt, cigar, and button factories, and a mail-order house, were unable to succeed.¹³

In the early twentieth century, proximity to New York, the convenience of rail travel, and the coming of the horseless carriage were setting the stage for Long Branch's re-emergence as a place to live. In Elberon more affordable houses sprouted, as one by

¹⁰ Van Benthuyssen and Wilson, 128.

¹¹ New Jersey Writers' Project, 114.

¹² "Automobile Races, Long Branch N.J.," postcard, New York Sunday World, (New Jersey Collection, Guggenheim Memorial Library, Monmouth College, West Long Branch, 1906).

¹³ New Jersey Writers' Project, 112.

one the shore hotels aged and crumbled and the sand bluff and beaches were worn away by the Atlantic. By the 1930s, Broadway business blocks were refaced in the shiny, Vitrolite fronts found in virtually every American city. There are such relics surviving in Long Branch today, as well as one, now vacant, terra-cotta and plate glass storefront.

Today, trains from Manhattan still roll through towns up and down the north Jersey shore, travelling around the Amboys, inland across Monmouth County's many creeks and swamps, and over the Navesink and Shrewsbury rivers to the Atlantic beaches of Long Branch, following a route laid down more than a century ago. However, many riders of New Jersey transit are now commuters rather than seaside revelers, and the landscape of Long Branch has become fairly suburban. Long Branch today presents ranch houses and road-generated sprawl across its meadows. Generations of debate over whether it is a resort or a city seem to have been resolved. Long Branch "has expanded from a tiny town struggling to preserve its identity against a giant resort to a mature American city," authors for the New Jersey Writers' Project had already declared by 1940.¹⁴

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- Sources:
- "Automobile Races, Long Branch N.J." Postcard. New York Sunday World. New Jersey Collection, Guggenheim Memorial Library, Monmouth College, West Long Branch, 1906.
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 - New Jersey Writers' Project. Entertaining a Nation: The Career of Long Branch. City of Long Branch, N.J., 1940.
 - Sebold, Kimberly, and Sara Amy Leach. Historic Themes and Resources within the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail: Southern New Jersey and the Delaware Bay. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1991.
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¹⁴ New Jersey Writers' Project, I.

Project Information:

This project was sponsored by the New Jersey Coastal Heritage Trail (NJCHT) of the National Park Service, Janet Wolf, director. The documentation was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS), Robert Kapsch, chief, under the direction of HABS historian Sara Amy Leach, project supervisor. Three historians completed the research during summer 1991: Field supervisor Sarah Allaback (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Alfred Holden (University of Vermont), and Camille Gatza (North Carolina). David Ames (University of Delaware) made the large-format photographs. Historian, Elizabeth Harris May (George Washington University), edited the HABS reports.